



Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio... among a team of civilian divers on a seemingly routine rescue mission



Ocean liner S.S. Poseidon keels over after being hit by a 90 ft tidal wave

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# Terror

**T**HE story of *The Abyss* is a tale of drama, intrigue, risk, personal sacrifice, emotional and physical endurance... and that's just the story BEHIND the story.

With a budget of \$50 million, writer-director Jim Cameron has created a cinematic epic which plunges the suspense-drama genre to unexplored depths.

Cameron's qualifications to make such a journey are impeccable, with heart-stopping *The Terminator* and white-knuckling *Aliens* to his credit.

In *The Abyss*, Cameron goes underwater to create a film which, critics concur, is arguably the most terrifying film ever made.

But if the end product is terrifying, it's only reflective of the production process.

"I've never been in a war," says Ed Harris, one of the film's stars, "but the mentality of being in a foreign place where daily you are faced with experiences you'd never ever had was a challenge."

Part nautical journey, part love story, the film is an enthralling adventure saga and a compelling account of personal courage.

Also starring Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio and Michael Biehn, it's the story of civilian oil-rig divers drafted by the Navy to search for a mysteriously incapacitated submarine. The search leads to an extraterrestrial encounter.

To attain the edge of realism he wanted, Cameron shot 70 per cent of the film underwater in two huge water tanks at an abandoned nuclear power station in North Carolina.

But his desire for authenticity had a price. Many of the actors and crew who worked on *The Abyss* have nothing but bad memories of the experience and have criticised Cameron's demands in pursuit of perfection.

Actors and crew were required to spend three hours at a time underwater throughout a 12 hour day, wearing heavy equipment amid the danger of a sealed set. The shoot lasted 14 weeks.

Soon after completing the film, Harris told one interviewer: "I'm not talking about *The Abyss*. And I never will."

He has since softened his stand, but only to relate an example of how "horrific" the shoot was.

"The daily mental and physical strain was enormous. I remember

By PHILLIP McLEAN

one day we were all in our dressing rooms and people began throwing couches out the windows and smashing the walls. We just had to get our frustrations out."

Leading lady Mastrantonio doesn't mention Cameron when talking about the stress involved in making the film, but it is clear she centres much of the blame for it on him.

"I was told: 'This is moviemaking', and I had to stop and disagree," she said. "The days were very long, there was no schedule, the conditions were uncomfortable..."

"It was tough," agrees Michael Biehn, who was in Cameron's *Terminator* and *Aliens*.

"But a lot of people's everyday jobs are tough. To me, it was like driving a car a little too fast - exhilarating."

**S**TILL, Biehn recalls a day when panic and rage set in. "I was 10 metres underwater and suddenly the lights went out. It was so black I couldn't see my hand. I couldn't surface. I realised I might not get out of there."

In self-defense, Cameron says everyone knew what they were getting into.

He remembers warning the actors, all of whom were trained and certified as divers for the film.

"I said to them if you are claustrophobic, don't like water and not prepared to work harder than you can ever imagine working in your life, don't take this part."

He adds, unapologetically: "I hope I push actors. This film is about personal challenge for everyone. I pushed myself harder than I have ever been pushed before and I hope others did too."

*The Abyss* has been with Cameron for 18 years. It was spawned in his fertile imagination when he was a high school student in Ontario, Canada.

A science buff, Cameron's epic came to the page after he attended a science lecture about deep diving.

He did not return to the story until years later when he considered merging an interest in diving with film.

"My interest was in taking the viewer on a journey — a journey to a place they've never been."

## Dive in for former classics

**I**N HONOR of the new deep-sea thriller *The Abyss*, we dive in for a look at 10 classic water movies. Glub, glub.

**LIFEBOAT (1944):** Rub-a-dub-dub, eight survivors in a tub - a rich-bitch reporter, a millionaire, the crew, the nurse and one Nazi. Only Hitchcock could pull off this one-set WWII drama without a hitch.

**REAP THE WILD WIND (1942):** Like *Gone with the Wind* done with pirates. Cecil B. De Mille weaves a tangled tale about 19th century shipwreck salvagers in Key West. Paulette Goddard is a Scarlett-like belle named Loxi who pines for John Wayne. And there's a giant squid, too.

**THUNDERBALL (1965):** A good, not great, James Bond adventure with Sean Connery in his fourth outing as 007. He goes on a sea hunt for a missing A-



bomb carrier. Exciting underwater effects - but the best special effects are the cleverly revealing bathing suits.

**THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE (1972):** A classic disaster flick which manages to stay afloat despite the visual and verbal clichés. *The Love Boat* would have killed for this cast: Gene Hackman, Red Buttons, Ernest Borgnine, Stella Stevens, Shelley Winters and Pamela Sue Martin.

**CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON (1954):** Old Fish Face has the hots for scientist Julia Adams. But he doesn't like her male companions on an Amazon expedition and starts

doing away with them. Originally 3-D, which explains why the rocks and birds keep flying by.

**IT CAME FROM BENEATH THE SEA (1955):** Stars a giant octopus that wants to make sushi out of San Francisco in this Godzilla-like thriller. A love triangle between a sub captain, a pseudo-liberated marine biologist (she still has to scream like a twit) and her co-scientist fills out the plot.

**20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA (1954):** James Mason's Capt Nemo is a brooding human sea monster who rules an underwater world in his futuristic sub. Along for the ride are Peter Lorre, Paul Lukas and Kirk Douglas as a salty sailor. Perils aplenty and another big squid.

**JAWS (1975):** The big fish story to beat all big fish stories. Director Steven Spielberg takes

Peter Benchley's canned tuna of a novel and turns it into lobster thermidor. Aside from the big fish, the real star is composer John Williams, whose edgy, violin-driven theme induces frenzied nail-biting.

**THE DEEP (1977):** The movie that launched a thousand wet T-shirt competitions, thanks to Jacqueline Bisset. Another Benchley story, this one about a sunken ship, lost treasure, a load of morphine and a really mean eel. Nick Nolte bobs about like an aging Beach Boy. Robert Shaw overacts.

**A NIGHT TO REMEMBER (1958):** A ship-shape British account of the doomed maiden voyage of the Titanic. What makes this a movie to remember is its ironic touches, including the string quartet that valiantly plays on even as the ocean swallows deck after deck.



# strikes The Abyss

The logistics in making that journey possible were mind-boggling.

Most film makers use available technology to create their screen work, but not Cameron. To make the film convincing, he would need to transcend technology.

He enlisted the aid of the diving community. With experts, he created a number of advancements for the film and diving industries.

These included an underwater communications system so sound could be taped live in the tanks; diving helmets enabling the audience to clearly see faces, since standard commercial scuba gear would not; and an underwater filling station.

He built a 10,000kg module to serve as Deepcore, the oil-drilling structure pivotal to the film.

It was placed in the nuclear water tanks, which held 25 million litres of water.

Setting his film in the black void of an abyss, Cameron also brought to the adventure elements of a morality play.

As cast members, Harris and Mastrantonio face the harsh nothingness and then their own relationship.

So did Cameron and producer Gale Anne Hurd, who had teamed with him to co-write and produce *The Terminator* and to produce *Aliens*.

The two cast off any uneasy feelings from their recent marriage break-up to make the film.

"We had a professional relationship before *The Termina-*

*tor*," says Hurd, who married Cameron after that film.

The survival of their working relationship rests largely on the success of *The Abyss* when it is released.

While Cameron, according to preview critiques, has yet again delivered the goods, film analysts question its moneymaking ability because of projected marketing hurdles and budget overrun.

Leads Harris (*Borderline*, *Swing Shift*) and Mastrantonio (*Scarface*, *Color of Money*) aren't proven box-office drawcards.

Also against it is the plot, which is difficult to explain and if explained gives away the story.

Although budgeted at \$35 million, a \$15 million blow-out was attributed mainly to problems with filming in the abandoned nuclear plant tank and the need to create new technology to film underwater.

Taking promotion and release expenses into account, analysts estimate its break-even mark will be in the region of \$80 million.

It is also being released in the wake of blockbusters like *Batman*, *Ghostbusters II*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and *Lethal Weapon II*.

Yet another thorn in its side is the title. According to research conducted by the film's distributor, Twentieth Century Fox, many people do not know the meaning of the word "abyss".

But a Fox spokesman counters: "Remember a picture called *Apocalypse Now*?"



Harris shares a touching moment with Mastrantonio



Ed Harris



Mastrantonio



Michael Biehn



Harris prepares to leave an underwater habitat for a perilous descent to confront the mystery of the abyss, a huge trench in the ocean floor

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